

Memorial Day In Duxbury's Cemeteries

By THE REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY

As I begin these lines the keepers of Duxbury's cemeteries are hard at work preparing for Memorial Day. Albert Doscher, superintendent the past 2½ years and Henry Peterson, retiring after 37 years and a half dozen others are painting iron fences, clipping shrubs and mowing lawns so the cemeteries will look their best.

The American Legion is setting new flags on veterans' graves, and the firing squad and chaplain and friends are looking forward to the celebration. They will begin their day at Ashdod cemetery in West Duxbury and Dingley cemetery in North Duxbury, moving on to the Delano tomb and then to Bluefish River and St. John's Church, where they will pay tribute to veteran navy men lost at sea. They will be joined by the DHS band at the "Old Burying Ground" on Chestnut St. and march down Pilgrim By-Way and onto Depot St. and thence to Mayflower Cemetery. A short service will be held in The First Parish Church and then town officials, the Legion Honor Guard and patriotic citizens together with Boy Scouts and Brownies will adjourn to the 2 war memorial monuments, on the left, the Veterans of all Wars Memorial, and on the right, the Civil War Monument, for the final military tribute in the form of musket volleys and taps.

It will be a great day especially for the young Cub Scouts and Brownies and the Legion and its friends. Many will recall these same ceremonies that have outdated all of us, and will remember other times and situations. I remember well being part of this as a Boy Scout and standing at attention during the volleys and dashing with my patrol members to snatch up the spent shells on the lawn, still hot from discharge. It is an appropriate gesture, and grateful citizens feel a touch of pride as we repeat this age-old tribute to those to whom we owe our freedom and peace.

Memorial Day is also a day for remembrance of all our beloved dead, and caring friends and relatives will take pains to clean up and trim and decorate the graves of loved ones at this same time. Flower shops will be crowded and gardens will give up their treasures in the general recognition of the debt we owe to all our departed.

Duxbury owns and operates 4 municipal cemeteries. A 5th cemetery, that of St. John's Episcopal Church, is privately owned and maintained by that congregation. The oldest cemetery in

town is the "Old Burying Ground" on Chestnut St. and Pilgrim By-Way where many of Duxbury's Pilgrims lie buried, including Myles Standish who died in 1656 at the age of 72, and John Alden and Priscilla. John lived to survive all the other passengers on the Mayflower, dying in 1687 at the age of 88. This cemetery, according to the report from the American Cemetery Ass'n, is the oldest cemetery in continuous use in the nation, outdating the one on Cole's Hill in Plymouth, and Jamestown, Va. and St. Augustine, Fla. It was here that the first 2 meeting houses of the town were located until by vote of the town (then also, of course, the church -- they were one and the same) a 3rd meeting house was built in 1784 on Tremont St. on the site of the present First Parish Church, itself built in 1840 in the heyday of Duxbury's commercial shipping. Mayflower Cemetery to which we shall return in a moment, whose first grave, that of Stephen Russell, is dated 1787, was the cemetery attached to this meeting house.

The 2 cemeteries, Dingley and Ashdod, were located in their respective places principally for people's convenience in days of horse-drawn hearses. Dingley was a family plot harboring several families including that of John Simmons. It was given to the town when the money-raising efforts of the Ladies' Church Union proved insufficient to maintain it. Ashdod cemetery was attached to what is now a "Free Christian Church," whose building stands adjacent to it on Keene St. Both these cemeteries were turned over to the town when in 1894 Town Meeting voted to assume the obligation for maintenance of the 4 town cemeteries and to establish standards of beauty and decency that are the hallmark of concern for the departed.

At this same time the town elected a board of trustees to be responsible for the care and maintenance of the cemeteries. The first board consisted of Thomas Alden, William Alden, Lawrence Bradford, Elisha Peterson (who was also an undertaker) and Samuel Soule. The present board consists of Dr. J. Newton Shirley, Ernest Chandler, Richard Locke, Carl Santheson Jr. and Donald Jordan. Each man is elected for one 5-year term.

By far the largest cemetery in town is Mayflower Cemetery, covering 35 acres on the west side of Tremont St. and across the street from a wooded section of town owned by the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society, providing privacy and protection. This cemetery was given to Duxbury by the Ladies Union Fair Ass'n of the Unitarian Church. These women had maintained the cemetery by money raised at church fairs for well over a century. The record of the transaction is on file in the town offices. The ladies had raised \$1,323.04 as well, that they turned

over to the town. Other donations to the general perpetual care fund have come from generous Duxbury citizens until its income at present pays well over half the cost of the upkeep of our cemeteries.

Mayflower Cemetery is maintained as an up-to-date business-like operation as well as a friendly personal enterprise. In a moment's time by a mere phone call you can find out the status and location of any deceased in the cemetery or as I had occasion to discover myself, recently, what the status of any family lot is at any given time. "This was not always so," Laurel Freeman (superintendent for 40 years) confided to me in a telephone interview. "I went out with pencil and paper all one winter to every single grave stone and put down on paper exactly where and what each grave lot was. Until I did this we had absolutely nothing to go on." We citizens of Duxbury owe a great deal to Laurel for his work and to Isabelle, his cousin, for many years town clerk, to whose article written in the magazine of the American Cemetery Ass'n I owe so much for this essay. Mayflower contains as if written on a scroll, the records of the lives of much of the town's history. Here stands the granite square block with a globe on top signifying the world-wide scope of Ezra Weston's life. Here we see several stone markers memorializing men who have been lost at sea. We have a grave of a man born at sea, his name was given "Seaborne" Wadsworth. A walk through the pleasant lanes of this cemetery on a cool Sunday afternoon would be as close as one could ever come to the history of the town. Such a walk would reveal a different attitude toward death from the one that prevails in general today. Here are some epitaphs:

"In the silent tomb we leave her
When her Savior Will release her
Rest eternal grant her"
Mary Goodrich -- St. John's 1823

"Sleep on thou silent unmolested dust
Thy Spirit is we humbly trust
Safe in the mansions of the Blest."

"All you who behold my stone
Consider how soon that I was gone.
Death does not always warning give,
Therefore be cautious how you live.
Repent in time, no time delay."
Esther Burgess 1817

Burial customs vary all over the world, and indeed in different stages of various cultures. The great difference between East and West (if we may consider Greek East) is between burning and burying. Because the Hebrews believed in the general resurrection, it

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was vital to keep the body -- and until recent times the same applied to the Christians. Greeks and East Indians, however, felt the soul was imprisoned in the body and so a burning and hence release of the soul was an act of reverence.

Cremation has come into Christian societies, although burial is still preferred. Duxbury now has the only crematory between Boston and Providence, R.I. and is becoming known as a place where this service can be provided. The growing custom is to hold a memorial service for the deceased in one's church, the ashes being interred at a convenient time privately in the cemetery. Another view is that the therapy needed around a grief situation like that of the loss of a loved one demands the actual bringing of the body into the church and the holding of the service there and then cremation and later on, perhaps privately, the interment of the ashes.

I don't know whence came the custom of the early settlers to bury without a prayer or eulogy. Was this a carry-over from the general attitude of "Waiting on God?" Who had, by his taking of this life, spoken in language far too profound to be cluttered with human words? It did surprise me as I read this report of the Pilgrim's burial custom. The first recorded prayers and eulogy at burial were given by Ichabod Wiswall at the burial of Jonathan Alden in 1697, the oldest son of John Alden whose stone in the "Old Burying Ground" is the oldest memorial stone in Duxbury. By 1730 prayers and eulogy had become well established.

The custom of burial from church continues; the proximity of worship to cemeteries emphasizes the conviction that physical death is not the end of a person's life. In traditional churchyards it is customary to bury lay people facing east to welcome the return of Jesus but the priest is buried facing the people as he will answer not only to Jesus in the general resurrection, but to the people who have been entrusted to his care as their pastor. A Christian custom that is followed in liturgical churches (i.e., which have a divided nave, choir and sanctuary) is to place the coffin on the nave level for lay people, on the choir level for a priest and in the sanctuary for a bishop.

Clergy and undertakers are hard put to respond to all kinds of different customs as we do to provide what consolation we can to the bereaved. One the new Episcopal Prayer Book prescribes is the closing of the casket during the burial office. One request that was received from a wealthy citizen of Buffalo, N.Y. was the burial in concrete of himself and his wife, with a granite monument to mark the site. A dean of our cathedral in that city on hearing this was heard to remark, "Well, we all have our ways of burial, but that couple is going to find it rather tough on Judgment Day."

The new part of Mayflower Cemetery was started in 1926. A main gate of beautiful Quincy granite was given by Mr. and Mrs. Ernest Bailey in 1927. This same year Miss Lucy Hathaway gave the granite and iron post and rail fence around the new property. In 1965 a great celebration was held around the Civil War Memorial signifying the centenary of the end of that war. Many dignitaries were present and our national heritage was reaffirmed.

If as has been said the 3 acid tests for the validity

of a culture are 1. the education and training and treatment of its children, 2. the way it deals with its poor, indigent, elderly and handicapped, and 3. the way it reverences its dead, we in Duxbury can certainly say with conviction that especially on point 3, we are doing a good job. So moved have people become at visiting our cemeteries, they have written and spoken much about it. One of our citizens, Isabelle Freeman, has written this poem with which I bring this report to a close:

ELEGY IN MAYFLOWER

By Isabelle Freeman

To dream! Where divers birds unite to fling
harmonic songs, and breezes lag until
the sun-warmed leaves and flowers barely sing
their muted tune. Sweet contrasts to fulfill
the law of God, some voices ring with shrill
insistence, some are plaintive, soft, and low.
While many hurry, some feet find the hill
too steep, and falter. Laugh fortissimo,
for largo move we towards the portico
to promised vistas hidden from our sights --
implicit goal beyond this status quo,
where labors cease and endless rest requites.
The strains of music; hearts that love or die;
Are milestones to our heavy by and by.

(Published in "Pennons of Pegasus," May 1975)

Can there be any higher tribute to our lovely
cemetery than this expression in poetic insight?